

~Other Speakers S-Z: Alexander Whyte:

'Think it not easy'—Samuel Rutherford

What a lasting interest Samuel Rutherford's pastoral pen has given to the hoary old castle of Cardoness. Those nine so heart-winning letters that Rutherford wrote from Aberdeen to Cardoness Castle will still keep the memory of that old tower green long after its last stone has crumbled into dust. Readers of Rutherford's letters will long visit Cardoness Castle, and will musingly recall old John Gordon and Lady Cardoness, his wife, who both worked out each their own salvation in that old fortress, and found it a task far from easy. For nine faithful years Rutherford had been the anxious pastor of Cardoness Castle, and then, after he was banished from his pulpit and his parish, he only ministered to the Castle the more powerfully and prevailingly with his pen. After reading the Cardoness correspondence, we do not wonder to find the stout old chieftain heading the hard-fought battles which the people of Anwoth made both against Edinburgh and St. Andrews, when those cities and colleges attempted to take away their minister.

Rough old Cardoness had a warm place in his heart for Samuel Rutherford. The tough old pagan did not know how much he loved the little fair man with the high-set voice and the unearthly smile till he had lost him; and if force of arms could have kept Rutherford in Anwoth, Cardoness would soon have buckled on his sword. He was ashamed to be seen reading the letters that came to the Castle from Aberdeen; he denied having read them even after he had them all by heart. The wild old laird was nearer the Kingdom of Heaven than any one knew; even his Christian lady did not know all that Rutherford knew, and it was a frank sentence of Rutherford's in an Aberdeen letter that took life-long hold of the old laird, and did more for his conversion and all that followed it than all Rutherford's sermons and all his other letters. 'I find true religion to be a hard task; I find heaven hard to be won,' wrote Rutherford to the old man; and that did more for his hard and late salvation than all the sermons he had ever heard. 'A hard task. a hard task!' the serving-men and the serving-women often overheard their old master muttering, as he alighted from the hunt and as he came home from his monthly visit to Edinburgh. 'A hard task!' he was often heard muttering, but no one to the day of his death ever knew all that his muttering meant.

'Read over your past life often,' Rutherford wrote to the old man. And Cardoness found that to be one of the hardest tasks he had ever tried. He had not forgotten his past life; there were things that came up out of his past continually that compelled him to remember it. But what Rutherford meant was that his old parishioner should willingly, deliberately and repeatedly open the stained and torn leaves of his past life and read it all over in the light of his old age, approaching death, and late-awakened conscience. Rutherford wished Cardoness to sit down as Matthew Henry says the captives sat down by the rivers of Babylon, and weep 'deliberate tears.' There were pages in his past life that it was the very pains of hell to old Cardoness to read; but he performed the hard task, and thus was brought much nearer salvation than even his old pastor knew. 'It will take a long lance to go to the bottom of your heart, my friend,' wrote Rutherford, faithfully, and, at the same time, most respectfully, to the old man. Human nature is lofty and head-strong in you, and it will cost you far more suffering to be mortified and sanctified than it costs the ordinary run of men.' And, instead of that plain speech offending or angering the old laird, it had the very opposite effect; it softened him, and humbled him, and encouraged him, and gave him new strength for the hard task on which he was day and night employed.

Cardoness was a small property, heavily bonded, and some of the leaves that were hardest to read in the diary of Gordon's early manhood told the bitter history of some added bonds. Sin would need to be sweet, for it is very dear. And then had come years of rack-renting of his tenants; the virtuous tenantry had to pay dearly for the vices of their lord. Rutherford had not been silent to old Cardoness about this matter in conversation, and he was not silent in his letters. 'You are now upon the very borders of the other life. I told you, when I was with you, the whole counsel of God in this matter, and I tell it you again. Awake to righteousness. Do not lay the burden of your house on other people; do not compel honest people to pay your old debts. Commit to memory I Sam. 12:3, and ride out among your tenantry, my dear people, repeating, as you pass their stables and their cattle-stalls, "Behold, I am old and grey-headed; behold, here I am: whose ox have I taken? Whose ass have I taken? Whom have I defrauded? Whom have I oppressed?" I charge you to write to me here at once, and be plain with me, and tell me whether your salvation is sure. I hope for the best; but I know that your reckonings

with the righteous Judge are both many and deep.' That was a hard task to set to a tyrannical old landlord who had been used to call no man master, or God either, to take such commands from a poor banished minister! But Cardoness did it. He mastered his rising pride and resentment and did it; and though he found it a hard task to go through with his reductions at next rent-day, yet he did it. Such boldness in the Day of Judgment will a good conscience give a man, as when old Cardoness actually stood up before the parishioners in the kirk of Anwoth and read to them, after the elders had conducted the exercises, a letter he had received last week from their silenced minister. It is one of Rutherford's longest and most passionate letters. Take a sentence or two out of it: 'My soul longeth exceedingly to hear whether there be any work of Christ in the parish that will bide the trial of fire and water. I think of my people in my sleep. You know how that, out of love to your souls, and out of the desire I had to make an honest account of you, I often testified my dislike of your ways, both in private and in public. Examine yourselves. I never knew so well what sin is as since I came to Aberdeen, though I was preaching about it every day to you. It would be life to me if you would read this letter to my people, and if they would profit by it. And now I write to thee, whoever thou art, O poor broken-hearted believer of the free salvation. Let Christ's atoning blood be on thy guilty soul. Christ has His heaven ready for thee, and He will make good His word before long. The blessing of a poor prisoner be upon you.'

Salvation was all this time proving itself to be a hard and ever harder task to John Gordon, with his proud neck, with his past life to read, with his debts and bonds and increasing expenditure, and with old age heavy upon him and death at his door. And Lady Cardoness was not finding her salvation to be easy either in all these untoward circumstances. 'Think it not easy,' wrote Rutherford to her. And to make her salvation sure, and to lead her to help her burdened husband with his hard task, Rutherford made bold to touch, though always tenderly and scripturally, upon the family cross. Their burdened and crowded estate lay between the whole Cardoness family and their salvation. Rutherford had seen that from the first day he arrived in Anwoth, and Cardoness and its difficulties lay heavy upon his heart in his prison in Aberdeen. And he could not write consolations and comforts and promises to Lady Cardoness till he had told her the truth again as he had told her husband. 'The kingdom of God and His righteousness is the one thing needful for you and for Cardoness and for your children,' wrote Rutherford. 'Houses, lands, credit, honour may all be lost if heaven is won. See that Cardoness and you buy the field where the pearl is. Sell all and buy that field. I beseech you to make conscience of your ways. Deal kindly with your tenants. I have written my mind at length to your husband, and my counsel to you is that, when his passion overcometh him, a soft answer will turn away wrath. God casteth your husband often in my mind; I cannot forget him.'

What a power for good is in Samuel Rutherford's pen! At a few touches it carries us across Scotland to the mouth of the Fleet, and back two hundred and fifty years, and summons up Cardoness Castle, and peoples the hoary old keep again with John Gordon and his wife and children. We see the castle; we see the rack-rented farms lying around the rock on which the castle stands; we see Anwoth manse and pulpit empty and silenced; and then we see Rutherford dreaming about Cardoness as he sleeps in his far-off prison. The stout old laird rises before our eyes with more than his proper share of human nature—a mass of sinful manhood, strong in will, hot in temper, burdened with debt in Edinburgh, and a deeper and darker debt elsewhere. The old lion lay, taken in a net of trouble, and the more he struggled the more entangled he became. And then her ladyship, a religious woman; yes, really a religious woman, only, like so many religious women, more religious than moral; more emotional than practically helpful in every-day life. All who have only heard of Samuel Rutherford and his letters will feel sure that he was just the effusive minister, and that his letters were just the soft stuff, to foster a piety that came out in feminine moods and emotions rather than in well-kept accounts and a well-managed kitchen and nursery. But we who have read Rutherford know better than that. Lady Cardoness is told, in kindest and sweetest but most unmistakable language, that she has to work out a not easy salvation in Cardoness Castle, and that, if her husband fails in his hard task, no small part of his blood will lie at her door.

But as we stand and look at Cardoness Castle, with its hard tasks for eternal life, a divine voice says to ourselves, Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; and at that voice the old keep fades from our eyes, and our own house in modern Edinburgh rises up before us. Here, too, are old men with hard tasks between them and their salvation—a past life to read, to repent of, to redress, to reform, to weep deliberate and bitter tears over. There are debts and many other disorders that have to be put right; there are those under us—tenants and servants and poor relations—whose cases have to be dealt with considerately, justly, kindly, affectionately. There are things in those we love best—in a father, in a mother, in a husband, in a

Lady Cardoness

wife—that we have to be patient and forbearing with, and to command ourselves in the presence of.

Salvation was not easy in Cardoness Castle, with such a master, and such a mistress, and such children, and such tenants, and with such debts and straits of all kinds; and Cardoness Castle is repeated over and over again in hundreds of Edinburgh houses to-night.